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Polite War: Soviet Spies In Our Midst

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Every weekday morning, a distinguished-looking man in a conservative suit and tie leaves his Northwest Washington apartment and drives his blue Oldsmobile 98 through the morning rush hour to his office three blocks from the White House.

Although secrecy is an important part of the man's business, there is much that the FBI can tell you about him. Arriving at the office by 8:30 a.m., he seldom leaves before 10 at night and often checks in on weekends and holidays to review the stacks of paper that accumulate on his desk. He shuns night life and social activity, and keeps a small circle of trusted friends.

The reason for the FBI's interest in Stanislav A. Androssov is simple: He is a Soviet spy.

According to the FBI, Androssov, 53, is resident chief of the Soviet Committee for State Security, or KGB, directing the covert and not-so-covert intelligence-gathering activities of scores of agents in the United States. Since arriving here last year, he has become a central figure in the Soviet Union's attempt to obtain political, military and technological secrets from the U.S. Asked about his activities as he entered the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street last week, Androssov responded politely, "It is not in the interest of improving our relations to speak about those things," and produced a business card that described his position as a counselor at the embassy. He referred to himself and his colleagues as "we diplomats," and said that in more than 30 years in the diplomatic service "this is the first time I'm getting so much attention from the FBI. I don't understand it."

In recent months allegations of increased Soviet intelligence activity have provoked controversy and chilled East-West relations from Tokyo to Paris to Bonn. Since Jan. 1, according to U.S. authorities, 93 Soviets have been expelled from 13 countries on charges of espionage or interfering in domestic political affairs.

But in Washington, Soviet spying activity—and the American response to it—follows a familiar pattern developed over nearly four decades of Cold War. With the predictability of two long-time dance partners, the KGB and FBI, the agency charged with counterintelligence, are engaged in a kind of stylized pas de deux, acknowledging each other warily in public while carrying on an intense struggle that remains shrouded in secrecy.

Given this secrecy and the sensitive political nature of the issue, assessing damage caused by Soviet espionage is a difficult task. Interviews with FBI officials, intelligence experts and scholars suggest, however, that despite worsening relations between the two superpowers and the accession of former KGB chief Yuri Andropov as Soviet leader, the danger posed by spying has not changed dramatically in the last couple of years.

"The number [of Soviet spies] remains fairly constant," says Theodore M. Gardner, head of the FBI's Washington field office, adding that there was an increase in activity around President Reagan's inauguration that was natural with the coming of a new administration.

Still, U.S. officials express concern that in the last decade the KGB's operations in this country have become more effective.

"Soviet collection has continued to increase, particularly in the last several years and particularly in areas of scientific and technological collection," said James E. Nolan, former deputy assistant director of the FBI during the 1970s. "They are more organized, more sophisticated, less opportunisitic. There are specific things they are after. I would suggest to you that the Soviets' requirement list would be the size of a Washington telephone directory."

There are about 280 Soviets assigned to their diplomatic mission here, ranging from Ambassador Anatoliy Dobrynin to cooks and drivers, according to U.S. authorities. By FBI estimates, about 130 of those are known KGB intelligence agents or members of the Soviet military intelligence service, the GRU. Nationwide, the FBI says, roughly 35 percent of the 1,300 Soviet personnel stationed in the United States are spies of some kind.

This is a number that has steadily grown over the last decade and been augmented by spies from Communist Bloc countries like Cuba, Poland, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia. As a result, the FBI has had to change its tactics depending more on electronic eavesdropping.

"It's not possible to do anything like a comprehensive physical surveillance with 1,000 Soviets in the U.S. and a couple of thousand other bloc agents, Nolan said. "Nobody can surveil 3,000 people every day.

"Surveillance has to be selective. It is very different from what it was in the 50s and 60s when the idea was that if you walked around with them they could not do anything. In the 1950s there were about 50 Soviets at the United Nations Secretariat [today there are over 300]. Also gone is our ability to know and recognize people."

The FBI's success in thwarting Soviet efforts is hard to measure. In April two Soviets, a lieutenent colonel assigned to the office of the military attache and a diplomat assigned to the nation's mission to the United Nations, were expelled and a third left hurriedly after they were caught in unrelated espionage activities.

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